

HISTORICAL NOTES FROM NAVY DENTISTRY'S FIRST YEAR

By André B. Sobocinski, Historian, BUMED

On August 22, 1912, President William Taft signed into law an act creating a formal corps of uniformed dentists in the U.S. Navy. This date did not mark the beginning of dental care in the Navy, but rather the formal establishment of a professional community of trained uniformed dentists.

Some form of dental care had long been practiced in the service, but at best, was an additional duty assigned to a Navy surgeon or hospital steward who had some dental training.



Extracting lower teeth without aide of dental chair, 1910s

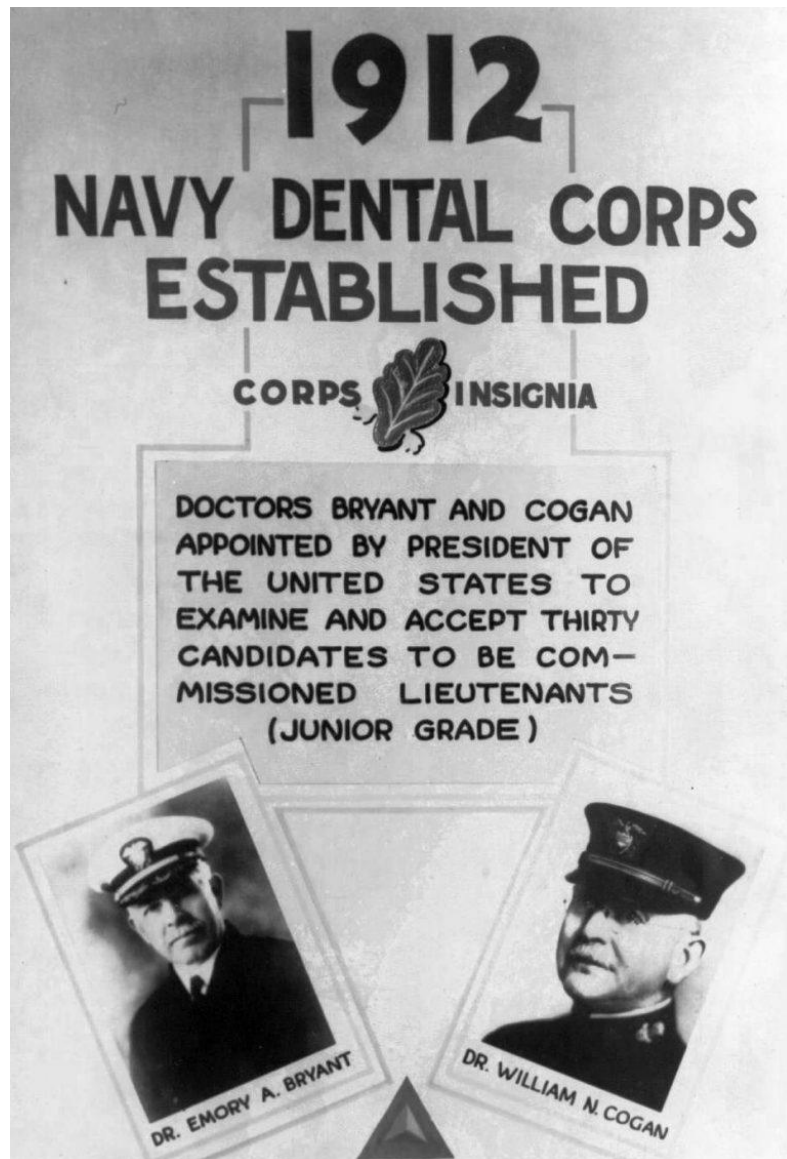
All in all, the dental scene—and the Navy's ability to dependable dental care prior to 1912—could be described as lacking. In a presentation delivered before the Northeastern Dental Society, one dentist painted the following picture of dental care before 1912:

"Government ships are provided with dental cases, each containing a set of forceps, elevators, evacuators, engine burs, plastic filling instruments, and high grade gutta-percha. These are used by the surgeons and hospital stewards, some of whom have taken courses in dentistry. Practically there is no room on ships for dental work, for chair, cabinet, engine, etc."

The First Dental Corps Officers Come Aboard

After August of 1912, the job of building the Dental Corps from its foundations fell to Drs. Emory Bryant and William Cogan. Appointed as the first two commissioned Navy dentists on October 23rd and 24th,

respectively, Bryant and Cogan were well-established figures on the dental scene in Washington, D.C., by 1912.



Navy Dental Corps in 1912 Poster

Dr. Emory Bryant was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, on August 10, 1863. After graduating from the Baltimore College of Dental Surgery in 1886, he operated a successful dental practice in the Burlington Apartments near Scott Circle in the Nation's Capital where his patients included President Theodore Roosevelt and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. His connection to Roosevelt also connected him to the president's primary physician, Rear Admiral Presley Marion Rixey, the Surgeon General of the Navy (1902-1910), who had long been an advocate for a Navy Dental Corps.

Dr. William Cogan was a native of Washington, D.C., born on May 31, 1856. Cogan had co-founded the Washington Dental College, which was incorporated into Georgetown Medical School in 1901. He held the distinction as the school's first dental dean, a role he was still serving in when appointed as a Navy dentist.

Owing to his deep connections to Georgetown, it is little surprise that many of the first Navy dentists were graduates from its dental school.

Bryant and Cogan set out to develop the selection criteria for the first Dental Corps appointees. Prospective candidates for the Dental Corps were required to appear before an examination board where they would undergo a series of physical and “competitive professional” examinations to determine their fitness to receive commissions in the Navy.

In November 1912, Bryant, Cogan and a Navy physician (Lieutenant Commander Richmond Holcomb) convened the first dental examining board in Washington, D.C. Practical portions of the examination were conducted at Georgetown University and The George Washington University. The physical examinations were administered on the second floor of the “Isolation Building” at the Naval Hospital Washington, D.C. (then located in the neighborhood of Foggy Bottom)

A total of fifteen dentists appeared before the examination board in November and December 1912; of this number, only four passed and received the first appointments on January 3, 1913.

DENTAL MERIT ROLL OF CANDIDATES FOR ACTING ASSISTANT SURGEON IN THE MEDICAL CORPS OF THE NAVY										
FOR THE USE REPORTED BY THE BOARD OF MEDICAL EXAMINERS, U.S. NAVY, WASHINGTON, D.C.										
Examined by the Naval Medical Examining Board which consisted of the U. S. Navy Surgeon General, Surgeon, and Surgeon's Mate.										
No.	Name	Service	Education	Age	Height	Weight	Chest	Vision	Hearing	Remarks
1.	Harvey, Harry	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
2.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
3.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
4.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
5.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
6.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
7.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
8.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
9.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
10.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
11.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
12.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
13.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
14.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed
15.	Harvey, James	United States Army	Georgetown University	28	5' 8"	150	34"	20/20	Normal	Passed

Dental Corps Examining Board Records, 1912

Dr. Harry Harvey was the first candidate approved for appointment. A former hospital corpsman, Harvey had originally enlisted in the Navy in 1905 and graduated from the Hospital Corps Training School in Norfolk, Virginia in September of that year. He served at hospitals at Chelsea, Mass., and Washington, D.C., where he moonlighted as a student at Georgetown Dental College.

Over that first year (August 22 1912–August 22, 1913) a total of 15 candidates were approved for appointments in the Dental Corps.

Formation of the Navy Dental Corps Reserve

The Navy's first dentists each held the same rank—"Acting Assistant Dental Surgeon," which was equivalent to Lieutenant (Junior Grade). Until 1916, there were no provisions for the promotion of Dental Corps Officers. Each were also required to serve three years of reserve status before transferring into the Regular Navy.

The same act that created the Navy Dental Corps in 1912 also established a Medical Corps Reserve. Remarkably—since a separate Dental Reserve (or for that matter a Navy Reserve) did not exist at that time, the Navy's first dentists were initially considered part of this Medical Corps Reserve. A separate Dental Corps Reserve was established on March 4, 1913.

In 1913, an additional nine dentists came into the Navy on temporary duty under the provisions of the new Dental Corps Reserve. Like Bryant and Cogan these dentists were each well-established in their practices, most were quite senior and one long past retirement age. Dr. Vines Edmunds Turner of Raleigh, N.C., was a Civil War veteran who was 76 years old at the time of his entry into the Navy.

Navy Dentistry's First Duty Stations

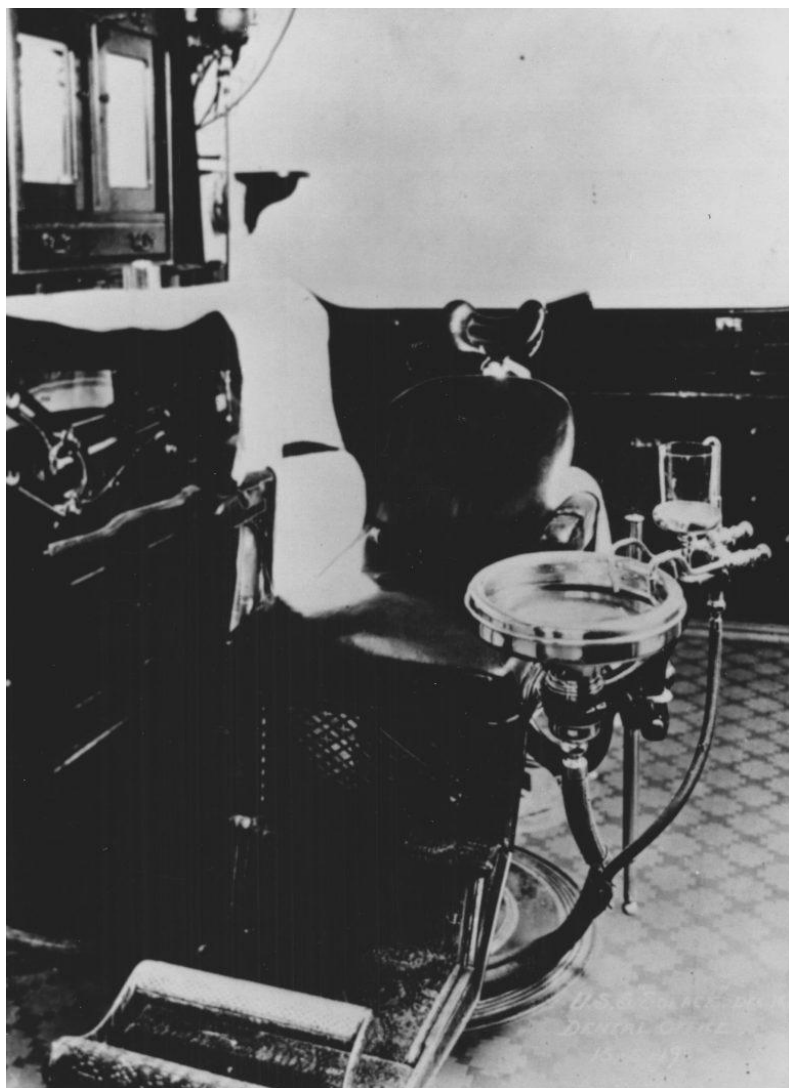
The Navy's first dentists were required to go through a period of indoctrination at the Naval Medical School in Washington, D.C., before being sent into the field. The first duty stations were selected based both on a population requiring dental services (e.g., recruits) and quite simply the accessibility of dental equipment at that location.

On March 5, 1913, Harry Harvey was ordered by BUMED to the hospital ship USS Solace becoming the first dental officer assigned to a ship or to serve at sea. One month later—on April 5, 1913—Joseph Mahoney reported aboard the armored cruiser USS Saratoga (ACR-2, formerly USS New York) as the first dentist aboard a warship. Two years later over a quarter of all dentists were serving at sea.



5 March 1913 –Dental Surgeon Harry E. Harvey aboard Solace

Among the first shore establishments to receive dentists were the Naval Training Stations in Newport, R.I., and San Francisco, California; stationary receiving ships—where new recruits were processed—at Brooklyn, N.Y., and Mare Island, California; and Navy Yards in Charleston, S.C., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Puget Sound, Washington.



Dental Office aboard USS Solace

In April 1913, James Lee Brown earned the distinction as the first dentist assigned to an OCONUS base when he received orders to Naval Station Guam. In that first year of Navy Dentistry's existence only he and USS Saratoga's Joseph Mahoney—who also doubled as the dentist for the Asiatic Station—were the only two dentists to serve overseas.

Finally, on August 4, 1913, Acting Assistant Dental Surgeon Lucian C. Williams of Texas, reported to Parris Island, S.C., becoming the first Navy dentist to serve with the United States Marine Corps. Just two years later, Navy dentists were regularly embedded with Marine Corps units in Haiti and in 1917 were deployed to active battlefields in World War I.

References

Annual Report of the Surgeon General, U.S. Navy, Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery to the Secretary of the Navy for the Fiscal Year 1912. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1912.

Annual Report of the Surgeon General, U.S. Navy, Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery to the Secretary of the Navy for the Fiscal Year 1913. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913.

The Dental Corps of the United States Navy: A Chronology, 1912-1987.

Register of the commissioned and warrant officers of the United States Navy and Marine Corps, January 1, 1912. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1912.

Register of the commissioned and warrant officers of the United States Navy and Marine Corps, January 1, 1913. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913.